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E. Howard Hunt goes by the book

By Diana West
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

"He won't talk about Watergate," said E. Howard Hunt's publicist.

"I don't want to talk about Watergate," said E. Howard Hunt.

But as E. Howard Hunt sat in a quiet corner of a posh Washington hotel, the subject came up from time to time, almost involuntarily, like the twinge of an old wound. Somehow it seemed out of place during the cocktail hour, as the 67-year-old former White House consultant sat spreading slivers of Melba toast with paté de maison.

Uppermost on his mind, though, was the publication of his 55th suspense novel, "The Kremlin Conspiracy" (Stein and Day, $15.95), because this time around, Washington was just another stop on a book tour.

"I write my books, and I publish them when I can find a publisher who's willing to take a risk," Mr. Hunt said. "You know, my pre-Watergate publishers have all — I've become a non-person," he stated matter-of-factly. "But I think the — how can I say this? — sanction that has been visited upon me is less because of Watergate than because of the political tone of my novels."

"The Kremlin Conspiracy" concerns a top candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize, secretly positioned by the Soviets to alter the balance of power and world opinion.

"I have a firm now," Mr. Hunt said referring to Stein and Day, "and it's probably the only non-liberal publishing firm. It's small, but at least it gets the word out somewhere."

The word?

"The point of view I espouse is an unpopular one," explained Mr. Hunt, pausing to sip his drink. His lined, almost creased face, broke into one of its frequent, mischievous grins. In spite of banker's pinstripes there was something incongruously collegiate about him, a heartiness to his manner reminiscent of fraternity row.

"I posit a set of Western values that very few other writers do. I feel the West is worth saving. We are basically one of the very few nations in the world, if not the only one, that is endowed with goodness."

And this attitude, Mr. Hunt maintained, is rarely found in the suspense genre, which is dominated by writers like John le Carré whose doctrine of "moral ambiguity" between the superpowers prevails.

"So it's very difficult to publish an anti-Soviet novel. On the other hand," he continued, "it's easy to do an espionage book that deals with the concept of the recrudescence of the Third Reich, let's say, or that Mengele's out there creating clones."

Thirteen years have passed since the burglars recruited by E. Howard Hunt were discovered inside Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Hotel. After serving 33 months out of a 35-year sentence in 13 different jails and prisons for his role in the break-in, Mr. Hunt today makes his home in a fashionable neighborhood of Miami (pronounced "Miamuh").

"They wouldn't let me write," said Mr. Hunt, unmistakably bitter about his experience in jail where he worked in the laundry, measuring incoming and outgoing prisoners for clothing. Why? "I don't think Judge Sirica liked the cut of my jib."

He paused before adding, "I was not among the more craven of the conspirators, if I do say so."

"But I don't want to talk about Watergate," he insisted.

He did, however, want to talk about the Reagan administration.

"I was talking to my wife before I came up here, and I said, 'You know, somebody's going to mention the disappointments I have with this conservative administration,' " he said, leaning back against the sofa, looking somewhat pale for a Floridian.

"It has occurred to me that not a darn one of them knows anything about foreign affairs. What foreign languages do any of them speak?

"Everyone obligatorily goes to the Berlin Wall, looks over, and mumbles something, or maybe they don't, but that ends it. These people are domestically oriented," he concluded.

"I hope that George Bush gets in and does some of the things we'd hoped Mr. Reagan would've, but we can't do it with a McFarlane at National Security, or with George Shultz. Because these are technocrats. These are not ideologues. You know, the day of the technocrat has pretty much come to an end in my opinion. You need a little spirit there."

When asked if he considered Ronald Reagan to be an ideologue, Mr. Hunt replied, "Well, I'd always thought he was, but . . ." His voice trailed off.

"I think I began to suspect all was not well when there were no reprisals for the tragedy in Iran," he said, referring to the hostage crisis that ended on the day of Mr. Reagan's first inauguration.

"I kept waiting for something to happen. I was sitting down there in Florida, scuba diving, fishing, writing a book, listening. I wanted to hear something explode somewhere," he said, his eyes widening. "I wanted to read, maybe, about an Iranian diplomat in Paris who was killed by an unidentified assassin. I'm waiting for things to happen, and nothing ever happened. And then, of course, the flight of KAL 007," he continued.

What should the United States have done?

"All right. I'll give you my stock answer. Unpleasant things begin happening to the perpetrators. Unpleasant, but identifiable. For example, one of their submarines just stops communicating. Two of their trade delegates are blown up in Paris. Nobody knows why."

It all began to sound like one of Mr. Hunt's novels.

"Certainly if we're the least bit serious about combatting terrorism — which I'm not convinced we are — there has to be an organ that can do it. A group that will go in and rescue people, and be competent in dealing

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out reprisals and retribution.

"But we're not serious," he said with a sad smile. "We're a non-serious people in a serious world," he said.

In addition to writing novels, Mr. Hunt will be busy this fall with yet another scandal, only this time, he's in charge of how things turn out — literally. Mr. Hunt is writing the book to the musical drama of — get ready for this one — the Claus von Bulow case.

And then, there is his lecture circuit, which often takes him to college campuses.

"There's so much ignorance out there," he said lamenting the gaps in historical knowledge he encounters among students. "And it doesn't matter if it's Sweetbriar College out in Virginia, or Harvard.

"And of course, I always get the question, 'What are the lessons of Watergate, Mr. Hunt?' "

There it was again.

"Who knows what the lessons of Watergate are?" he asked. "You know, that's one of those things like the Rashomon effect. Depending on where you were seated at that time, you divine or infer what you want from the whole situation.

"I would say, for example, never follow a pusilanimous leader. Always get orders in writing, you know, all sorts of things like that. You know," he said, "I'm saying that partly in a jocular fashion.

"But you know, who really cares at this juncture? This was not an assault on the constitution as the liberals were trying to say," he said. "The whole thing was very ill-

E. Howard Hunt. UPI

advised. It was one of those things, I guess."

"The disavowal by the administration of any culpability for us made us fair game," he added. "They had no way of getting at Nixon, so they went after us instead.

"You know, they can rend me for my verses," he said echoing Shakespeare's 'Julius Caesar,' "but they weren't so bad anyhow."

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